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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 001218

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SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT SETS NEW ELECTION DATE AND PARTIES
APPEAR ON BOARD

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Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) The Caretaker Government acceded to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) demand to delay Parliamentary elections and moved the date from December 18 to December 29. Initial BNP reaction was positive, even though the Government did not fully meet three other party preconditions for participating in the election. Awami League leaders, who did not favor a delay because they believed their party was in a strong position to win the vote, griped publicly about the change. In private, however, they indicated the party would not boycott. While we expect political leaders to raise continuous demands throughout the campaign, the decision to delay the vote could well lead to credible elections involving all parties. Throughout the recent intense political jockeying, all sides have sought reassurances from the USG that it continues to advocate free and fair elections this year.

SAVING THE ELECTIONS BY POSTPONING THEM

¶2. (U) The Election Commission announced November 23 that Parliamentary elections would be delayed 11 days to December 29. The decision came after the BNP demanded elections scheduled for December 18 be delayed until at least December 28 to provide the party more time to get ready. The party had cited difficulties in preparing for elections while its leader, former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, languished in jail on corruption charges. (Note: She was released in September. End note) Intraparty factional rivalries between Zia loyalists and reformers also left the BNP in disarray. The Commission also announced upazilla (county) elections would be held January 22, generally in line with the BNP demand that local elections follow the Parliamentary vote by a month.

¶3. (SBU) The Caretaker Government did not meet two other BNP demands for participating in the elections: scrapping Election Commission powers to unilaterally disqualify candidates and immediately lifting the State of Emergency. Two prominent Zia advisers, however, told PolEcon Counselor the Commission's powers already appeared sufficiently watered down to put the issue on the back burner. They said the State of Emergency could be lifted as late as December 12, when official campaigning starts. The advisers cited the release

from jail on bail of senior BNP leader Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain as contributing to the party's sense of rejuvenation and momentum.

14. (SBU) Sheikh Hasina and other Awami League leaders argued against changing the election date, saying the schedule should not be held hostage to BNP whims. Before the Commission announcement, however, Awami League spokesman Syed Ashraf Islam told PolOff the party would reluctantly agree to any date in December. After the announcement, Hasina confidant Tarique Ahmed Siddique said she had agreed to December 29 even though the party would publicly decry the decision to delay the vote. Siddique noted several senior Awami League officials did not want the BNP to participate in elections and were urging Hasina not to accept a delay in the timetable. As of 1600 November 24 local time, the Awami League had neither accepted nor rejected the new timetable.

UP NEXT: WHO WILL THE PARTIES NOMINATE?

15. (SBU) The parties have until November 30 to nominate candidates for Parliament. In the next few days, the two major parties will meet with their alliance partners to divvy up seats for their respective slates of candidates. Most Awami League candidates already have filed nominating papers, but spokesman Ashraf said changes were still possible in the party line-up. In particular, there was a move afoot to convince Hasina to approve nominations of several reform-minded mid-level party officials she earlier passed over, apparently for being insufficiently loyal to her. The BNP had yet to announce who it would nominate, but Zia adviser Shafik Rehman said all but about a dozen tickets had

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been decided. The big question was how many party reformists who broke with Zia while she was in jail would receive nominations.

16. (C) The finalized nomination lists will be the first indication whether either party is serious about tackling Bangladesh's endemic political corruption. Scores of leaders from both parties -- including Zia and Hasina -- were jailed during the State of Emergency on graft charges. Some were convicted but the courts released many others on bail and are eligible to run for Parliament, including the two former prime ministers. Although the BNP dropped its demand that convicted party leaders be allowed to run for office while their sentences were on appeal, we expect both parties to nominate many people either charged with graft or widely perceived to be corrupt. Professor Ataur Rahman, one of Bangladesh's leading political scientists, told PolOff he saw no evidence the nation's money- and violence-fueled politics had changed despite the anti-corruption reform efforts of the Caretaker Government in the nearly two years since it took power.

COMMENT: PROGRESS ON ELECTIONS, DON'T FORGET REFORMS

17. (C) Postponing the Parliamentary elections until December 29 makes a boycott of the polls by the BNP much less likely. Still, the high-risk game of political chicken in which the parties jeopardize the elections to eke out maximum tactical benefits is likely to continue. The Embassy will strongly discourage such brinkmanship and looks forward to the visit of Senators McCain, Lieberman and Graham in early December as an opportunity to emphasize the importance of political compromise to a successful democracy. The Embassy also will encourage both parties to fulfill their promises to tackle graft and do away with "winner-take-all" politics once the newly elected Parliament is seated. A return to the status quo ante of endemic political graft and violence would threaten stability, making Bangladesh more attractive as a

haven for both domestic and international terrorists.
Although both Zia and Hasina have confided to us they are
committed to fighting extremism, it is not yet clear they
understand that good governance is an indispensable component
of that battle.
Moriarty